

The Diameter of the Gospel

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:3-6 NIV)

REMINDER: GOSPEL HEADLINE IS ABOUT GOD...NOT ME

For three weeks now, we have started the year with a laser-pointed focus on the gospel. We’ve heard that word used so often in church that we probably have used it as a “stand in” for all sorts of things that really aren’t gospel. Over the years, I’ve found myself holding up a Bible and saying “God gave us the gospel”—giving the impression that the gospel is everything recorded from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22—rules, laws, stories, letters, cries, tears, prayers, judgment, persecution, and victory. No—the gospel is not “the Bible.” The Bible reveals the gospel, for sure. But the Bible is not what we mean when we say “the gospel.”

I’ve found myself calling someone a “gospel preacher” or saying we heard a “gospel message” and meant something very different than how the word is used in Scripture.

I’ve attended and even preached “gospel meetings” where we covered lots of Bible topics, covered rules for behavior, covered proper ways to worship, covered examples of what not to do, and ended every lesson calling for people to be baptized. Did you know that you can do all of that and never preach the gospel?

No—the gospel is not the whole Bible, it’s not how to do church right, it’s not becoming a Christian. The gospel relates to all of that. The Bible tells us the gospel; the gospel compels us to live right and worship in spirit and truth; and becoming a Christian is, indeed, one way that we “obey the gospel.” And the week after next, we will spend a whole lesson on what it means to obey the gospel.

But the gospel is the announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord, because God, in Christ, through his death, burial, and resurrection, has set up his everlasting kingdom, and is uniting one family, forgiving sins, pouring out his Spirit, and will return to raise our bodies and dwell with his people forever. And this great news is brought to you by the letters G-R-A-C-E.

And I had originally planned to do a 3-part series, but it has turned into a 5-part series because I keep getting really good questions! For example, a member here said something like this to me:

“You said the gospel is simple but not simplistic, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And that even though the gospel is simple—so simple you can summarize it as “Jesus Christ!”—there is depth to the gospel, and no two Bible writers describe the gospel in exactly the same way.”

“That’s right. I did say that.”

“Ok. Then last week you said it is real problem to “add” to the gospel by putting in things that don’t belong there.”

“Yes, that is a good summary of my last three lessons. The gospel is simple, but it has depth, and we shouldn’t add to the gospel.”

“Well here is my confusion: I don’t want to add to the gospel. But every time we read the Bible, I find more “depth” (as you say). It looks like the gospel includes forgiveness of sins, and it includes bringing jews and gentiles into one family, and it includes seeing Jesus as savior and Lord. So...whenever I discover something new, something important, how do I know if it is “gospel” or “not gospel”? How do I know if I’m simply filling out the full *meaning* of the gospel or if I am adding *to* the gospel? I mean, where do you draw the line?”

That is a great question! So this morning, I want to help answer that really important question. Can we draw a circle around what the gospel proclaims? To put it another way, can you show me the diameter of the gospel?

I believe we can.

THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

The gospel is the original message—the original announcement—that inspired people to give their lives to Christ. It was being preached long before we had a New Testament. Jesus went around telling people to “repent and believe the gospel.” The Apostle Paul says that when he came to Corinth (long before he wrote his letter to Corinth, and even longer before that letter was collected with other letters to form a Bible), he told them the gospel. So the gospel pre-dates the New Testament.

When people didn’t have what you have in your hand—when they didn’t have a Bible, they still had the gospel. But there are other phrases for “gospel” that mean the same thing.

Let’s open our Bibles to the book of Acts, and I want to focus on the word “word.” It feels like second nature to equate “word” with the Bible. If someone said “this year, my new year’s resolution is to get more into the word,” they probably mean “I want to read my Bible more.” “Word” can mean that. Word sometimes does mean that.

But let’s remember that the New Testament had not been written yet. No one had a copy of the New Testament sitting on their nightstand. And most people didn’t have their Old Testament sitting their either. Most sharing was by word of mouth, and if you wanted to read or hear something read, you’d go to synagogue or Temple for that.

So with that background, notice how the book of Acts talks: “The word of God grew” (6:7). “The word of God multiplied” (12:24). “The word of God prevailed” (19:20).

Sometimes the phrase isn’t “word of God.” It’s just “the word” (see 10:44; 14:25; 16:6). “Many who heard the word believed” (4:4). “Those who were scattered travelled...preaching the word” (11:19).

There are some beautiful variations. “The word of the Lord” (8:25; 13:49; 15:36; 16:32); “the word of the Lord Jesus (19:10); and “the word of his grace (14:3; 20:32).

These phrases can’t mean the New Testament writings. It’s hard to imagine that Acts is referring to everything that is going to be written down in the New Testament eventually. That doesn’t seem to be the natural reading either. And it doesn’t mean the Old Testament. In Acts 17:11, the good folks in Berea “received the word”; but that wasn’t receiving the Bible, because they compared “the word” they received with “the (OT) scriptures.”

No, something else is going on here. I'd like you to consider that what the book of Acts means by "the word" or "the word of God" or "the word of the Lord" or "the word his grace" is the gospel.

I can show you explicit and implicit proof for this. First the explicit proof. In Acts 15:7, Paul says "God made a choice among us, that the Gentiles by mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe." Earlier in the book, "word" and "gospel" are linked again: "And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans" (Acts 8:25). The terms are interchangeable. The word of the Lord, the word of His grace, is the message of the gospel. Preaching the word is "preaching peace by Jesus Christ" (10:36). It is preaching the good news of salvation. This is also why Acts says to Abraham's children and to the Gentiles "the word of this salvation" has been sent (13:26). Paul is going to do the same thing with language in Ephesians 1:13, when he says you trusted in Christ "after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." In Luke 2, an angels says the "good tidings" (or gospel) brings "great joy" to "all people." Well in Acts 13:48, the gospel goes not just to the Jews, but the Gentiles, and "when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

It's why "the word" in the book of Acts is attached to all the things you and I know as how to respond to the gospel. For example, the gospel must be heard, and the word is "heard" (4:4; 13:7, 44; 19:10). But how shall they hear without a preacher? So the apostles and ministers go about "speaking" (4:31; 13:46), "teaching" (15:35; 18:11), "preaching" (8:4; 11:19; 13:5; 14:25; 15:35; 16:6), "publishing" (13:49), and "testifying" (8:25) to the word of the gospel. The word is "believed" (4:4; 13:48; 15:7); the word is "received" (8:14; 17:11), those that "gladly received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41), and salvation, inheritance, and the gift of the Spirit come to those who believe and receive the word (10:44; 13:26; 16:6; 20:32). Preaching the word of the Lord makes "brethren" (15:36).

So, if you've always just assumed that "the word of God" refers to the Bible, I hope this little study of Acts helps you see that for the first followers of Jesus, armed with the story of the cross, "the word" that people heard and received was the gospel.

But if "the gospel" is something less than "everything in the Bible," it is certainly more than "just a statement about Jesus." We said the gospel has depth. So if we stay in Acts, we'll see that Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months, "teaching the word of God among them." The gospel is deep enough to spend 18 months on it? You betcha.

And that brings us to the text where I want to camp for the remainder of our time together this morning: Ephesians 4:4-6. You might recall that Ephesians remains one of my favorite books of the Bible. There are 6 chapters. For three chapters, Paul hardly mentions anything we are called to do for God; he simply extols what God, in Christ, has done for us. What his death and resurrection means for us, and not for us only, but for the whole world. For 3 chapters, he simply shares the gospel. In the last 3 chapters, Paul wants to show all the ways the gospel touches everything in our lives. How the gospel changes our marriage; how the gospel changes our parenting; how the gospel changes our business relationships. The gospel changes everything. And right in-between the transition from announcing the gospel to putting in practice the gospel, Paul lays out the 7-layer cake that serves as his platform for what the gospel project is about. It is the circle, the circumference that provides the diameter to the gospel.

When Augustus Caesar went to war and won, he united a whole empire behind him. It was this uniting power that formed the basis of all the things said about him, including calling him “Lord,” “God,” “Son of God,” and “Savior of the World.” And etched in stone was this line: “the birthday of the God—Augustus—began the announcement of good news to all the world.” The Roman gospel was that one man has united the whole world through his saving power, and that makes him king, and we pray his kingdom lasts forever.

That’s where the language comes from that was in the air. Ephesians is written to a Roman colony, where citizens prided themselves on belonging to that one united kingdom of Rome, under their Lord and Savior, Caesar Augustus. So in the middle of his book to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul says “do you want to talk about unity! Because of what God did in Christ, the gospel I preach unites the whole world because it’s a united story about a united God. And he lists 7 “ones.” They are important to remember, and my good friend Scott Adair has helped develop an easy way for us to remember them.

FINGERS OF FAITH: REMEMBERING THE 7 ONES

In the early years of the American Restoration movement, people from lots of different backgrounds were rethinking how to respond to Jesus. Between 1827 and 1830, a preacher for the Mahoning Baptist Association by the name of Walter Scott developed a simple mnemonic device for children to remember the key elements involved in our response to gospel, as recorded in Acts 2:38. He taught the children to open their hand and count out a “five finger exercise”: (1) faith, (2) repentance, (3) baptism, (4) remission of sins, and (5) gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the years, our churches have

adopted and adapted this device. Perhaps you remember learning it a bit differently: (1) hear, (2) believe, (3) repent, (4) confess, (5) be baptized.

The object of this simple children’s lesson was to create a “handy” way to summarize our response to the Christian story. I, for one, am grateful that someone took the time to help us remember (and remember easily) something so important as how to respond to the gospel. But what if we could remind ourselves—young and old alike—of the story itself, the story to which we are called to respond? What if there was a “handy” way to summarize the gospel?

What we would need is something that touches on all the central items the gospel seeks to proclaim, the things that would have been believed and received when the “word” was preached. We would want it to include the things that appear over and over again in the early speeches of Acts, that ground the teaching of the Apostles in the rest of the New Testament, and that encapsulates what “the word of His grace” was meant to include. And since baptism dramatically displays the gospel, it would need to include all the major truths being proclaimed in that moment as well. That’s a tall order, but I believe Scott’s device is brilliantly conceived, and is consistent with the New Testament witness.

Are you ready for it? You’ll find all 7 here in Ephesians 4, but I’m going to go out of order.

1. Thumbs Up: I Believe Jesus is Lord



Put your hand into a fist. Now raise your thumb. When you use the thumb emoji, you are saying “yes, I agree.” At our baptism, we ask “do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?” And you say “yes I do.” The gospel affirms that Jesus is Lord. This is a non-negotiable, and we start our baptism with this proclamation. Jesus’ lordship. There are a number of cognate terms that could fit under here. He’s the Messiah. He’s the Son of God. He’s the promised one in the line of David who is now our King.

We see this important element proclaimed in the sermons and speeches of Acts. In Acts 2, Peter says “God made him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). In Acts 10, Peter’s sermon to Cornelius includes this line: “He is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). Clearly, the Lordship of Jesus is something the gospel proclaims.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul simply says there is “one Lord” (Eph.4:5).

2. Index Finger: I Believe There is One God—Father, Son, & Spirit



Now put out your index finger and point it up. You will notice there are two lines on the inside of your knuckles, creating three sections. There is one God, manifest in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. We are baptized into the one (singular) name of the Father, Son, and Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Believing there is one God is clearly a non-negotiable central truth of the Christian faith, for everyone who comes to God must believe that He is (Hebrews 11).

We see this important element proclaimed in the sermons and speeches of Acts. In Acts 2, Peter says this Jesus, God raised up, and then shed forth the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:31-33). In Acts 10, Peter’s sermon to Cornelius says “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power...for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

Clearly, the fact that we serve one God is immensely important. Unlike the pagan world that worshipped a multiplicity of Gods, we are monotheists who believe God is one—fully and completely united in every way. But God shares and receives love, which means there is giver, receiver, and love shared between the two at all times. We call this Father, Son, and Spirit. The fact that we have one God (creator, redeemer, and friend) is something the gospel proclaims.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul simply says there is “one God” (Eph. 4:6).

3. Peace Sign: I Believe in the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus



Now hold out your first two fingers making the “peace” sign. With your other hand, run your finger down the inside of your index finger, and up the inside of your middle finger—symbolizing the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Romans 6 clearly implies that our baptism shows our participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. This is our faith. Paul says if Christ didn’t die and wasn’t raised, our faith is vain; our preaching was in

vain, and you will die in your sins. The faith delivered to the saints is the message of the cross. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 this is of “first importance” as we put our faith in the finished work of Christ.

We see this important element proclaimed in the sermons and speeches of Acts. In Acts 2, Peter says the same twice that this Jesus that you “by wicked hands have crucified and slain... God hath raised up” (Acts 2:23-24, 31-32). One chapter later, Peter says you “killed the Prince of life,” but “God hath raised [him] from the dead” (Acts 3:15). In Acts 10, Paul says to Cornelius that “they slew” Jesus and “hanged” him “on a tree;” but “Him God raised up the third day” (Acts 10:39-40). When Paul preached in Antioch, he said the people wanted him slain; so they killed him, took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb. “But God raised him from the dead” (Acts 13:28-33).

This is what we believe. Our faith is in Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

And Paul simply says there is “one faith” (Eph. 4:5).

4. Ring Finger: I Believe in One Body, the Church, the Bride of Christ



Now turn your attention to your ring finger. The ring symbolizes your relationship status. The church is married to Christ. Every believer, in their baptism, is added to the body of Christ, and becomes part of his bride. And God has always wanted one people *E pluribus Unum* (out of many, one). His dream was one body, made up of Jews and Gentiles, males and females, all one in Christ Jesus.

And we see the call for and the dream of one body throughout the sermons and speeches in Acts. The word preached is the word of “peace in Jesus Christ” (10:36).

Those who gladly received the word were “added unto them” (Acts 2:41). And the story gets better. In Acts 10, Peter is preaching that Jewish background is not essential, but “in every nation, those who fear God work righteousness are acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35). And God demonstrated this fact. The Jewish believers were astonished, because the Spirit of God was also poured out on the Gentiles (Acts 10:45), who were baptized and also added to the body (Acts 10:48). And in Acts 13, Paul said “all who fear God” can receive this word of salvation (13:26). First the Jewish hearers followed Paul (Acts 13:43), but then the Gentiles also received the good news (Acts 13:48). One body, made up of Jews and Gentiles, reconciled and preaching a message of reconciliation. This is a central proclamation of the gospel.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul simply says there is “one body” (Eph. 4:4).

5. Pinky Finger: I (Weak and Sinful) Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins



Your pinky is your weakest and shortest finger, just as we are weak and “fall short” of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Our need for forgiveness is obvious. All people are called to repentance and baptism as a request for God to forgive us of our sins. We recognize that we bring nothing to God; God grants us righteousness because He alone has status (Rom 3:10, 21-26; Phil. 3:9; 1 John 2:1). Repentance acknowledges that we stand in need of God’s grace. And just as God is the one who does the work, we receive it, baptism is a passive act in which we allow someone else to plunge us into Christ’s death, to receive the forgiveness He promises. As one preacher put it, “all we got to do is bend our knees.”

Paul said “through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 13:38). Peter told Cornelius that “through his name whoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Peter said to repent so that our sins may be blotted out (Acts 3:19), and we are told several times that forgiveness is extended, washing away our sins, when, in our baptism, we call upon the name of the Lord (Acts 2:38; 22:16). The gospel, after all, is “the word of salvation” we received (Acts 13:26).

Our weakness, our sinfulness is obvious. But his willingness to wash us clean is gospel.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul simply says there is “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

6. Palm Out: I Accept the Gift of the Holy Spirit



Place your palm out like you are receiving a gift. We also recognize that, in our baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Galatians 4:6 that having God's spirit is proof that we are children of God. We find spirit language in Acts 2 (vv33, 38), Acts 10 (vv38, 44), and Acts 13 (v52), but it is also the main hope expressed in Acts 1 as the people wait for the promise of the Father, which is the gifting of God's Holy Spirit. The spirit does the

sanctifying work. And Paul said in Acts 20 "I commend you to God, and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). That requires God's Holy Spirit. The Spirit being given to fill your life with His goodness, to fight your battles for you, to empower you to grow in the grace of God, is a central teaching of the gospel.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul simply says there is "one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4).

7. Raised Palm: I Believe in the Hope of Resurrection and Life Everlasting



Now, lift your palm raising it to the sky. Paul tells us there is "one hope" (Eph. 4:4), and that hope is the hope of resurrection and renewal. God will raise the dead and we shall be changed so that we may forever be with the Lord (1 Corinthians 15). God

will also keep his promise to the whole creation, remove the curse of sin, and make everything right (Romans 8). We share this hope of resurrection and renewal. In our baptism, we come up out of the water, visibly dramatizing the rising to walk in newness of life (Romans 6).

And what do we find in the speeches in Acts? "Repent and be converted" says Peter; not just so your sins will be blotted out, but also that "times of refreshing may come" when he sends Jesus Christ, who has to stay in the heaven "until the times of restitution of all things" that God has been talking about since the creation story (Acts 3:19-21). Peter preached of the judgment to come (Acts 10:42), and Paul spoke of the inheritance we will received (Acts 20:32).

Our hope for resurrection, dramatized in our raising from the water, reminds us and the world watching that God is in the restoring business. We await a glorious future.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul simply says, there is “one hope” (Eph 4:4).

THE DIAMETER OF THE GOSPEL

In these 7 ones, we see the outline for speeches in Acts; the outline of the ethical system Paul draws from in the Epistles; the outline for later Christian creeds. In short, we see a summary of the word that was preached all over the world, even to people who never received a New Testament. But they received the gospel.

What are the issues we get so worked up about? What are the teachings we want to include when we are asked what the gospel is all about? I hope this little device is helpful in reminding us of the word of his grace, the word of this salvation, the word of the gospel by which we are saved.

And now, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.